

## ***ПОЛИТИЧЕСКИЙ ПРОЦЕСС: ЕДИНСТВО ВО МНОГООБРАЗОВАНИИ***

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### **DIFFERENT COURSE AND SAME OBJECTIVE: THE CONTINUING ROAD TO REGIME CHANGE IN SYRIA**

#### **Introduction**

An open war between the United States led allies and the Syrian government of al Assad seemed almost inevitable when the ‘red line’ on the use of chemical weapons in the Syrian war imposed by Obama was conveniently broken. Naturally, these actions were quickly blamed on Assad as ‘irrefutable’ and ‘undeniable’ by those same countries that had been consistently advocating a military ‘solution’ to end the conflict. However, a combination of a deep rooted public aversion to another war and the so-called Russia proposal on securing the chemical weapons and avoiding a military conflict, for now, ultimately prevailed. This does not change the ultimate goal of the US-led allies, although it does momentarily close one window on how to achieve regime change.

There is a lot of literature on the issue of mass media being used to manipulate public opinion within the context of armed conflict (Snow, 2003; Willcox, 2005; Jowett & O'Donnell, 2006; Bennett et al., 2007; Zelizer& Allan, 2002). Many discuss the use of frames and narratives, which are used to guide the nature of the discussion (DiMaggio, 2009; Tuman, 2010; Nacos, 2007). There are also beginning to appear, academic articles on the Arab Spring, including those that take a less than positive appraisal of the situation. These are often taken from

the point of view of ethics, law or political science (Siebens& Case, 2012; Friedman, 2011; Springborg, 2011). However, there are very few from a communication perspective on the issue of the Arab Spring and how it is managed (Khondker, 2011; Simons, 2013; Simons, 2012). This present article shall tackle the subject of understanding what happens when the goal stays the same, but the means of achieving have changed owing to events and opinion in the political information environment with the example of Syria post-August 2013.

Mass media articles shall be scoured for news items that relate to Syria, especially with regard to the situation where the message conveyed show the realities of the same goal, but changed means of attaining it. This makes news a valuable asset in the hands of capable influencers of public opinion. Therefore, there is a need to visit the original theoretical goals of news that pertain to the notion of being a public good. Then from this point to explore the reasons of how and why there should be attempts to manipulate the news.

The next section takes a look at the role of motivation and propaganda in the news. To explore how these two particular aspects are managed in order for the originator of the manipulated message to realise their goals and objectives. This lays the groundwork for introducing news reports within the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that have been elaborated. One of the bigger problems faced by those advocating for military intervention in Syria is that there are many different discrepancies and contradictions that have been surfacing, which has the effect of undercutting their sense of legitimacy, plus the basic communication problem of trying to support failed policies. For instance, by engaging in the region with military force and the notion of peace and democracy to the Middle East and North Africa through these actions, one only needs to look at the tangible results in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Egypt and Tunisia.

### **Theoretical Role of News**

News is something that saturates the information environment, and can come in many different shapes and forms from many different kinds of media. So what is

news exactly? Denis McQuail provides a concise definition. “The main form in which current information about public events is carried by media of all kinds. There is a great diversity of types and formats as well as cross-cultural differences, but defining characteristics are generally held to be timeliness, relevance and reliability (truth value)” (McQuail, 2010: 564). News can be found in many different shapes and forms, there are a number of common underlying conceptual commonalities though.

One of the basic underlying assumptions and duties of journalism is to separate ‘facts’ from ‘values’ – i.e. the importance of objectivity in reporting. News was something that was seen as needing to be factual and non-partisan (Allan, 1999: 18). Therefore, there is an inherent commitment to the truth in news reporting. “The news frame’s tacit claim to comprehensiveness dictates that it must be seen as ‘balanced’ and ‘fair’ in its treatment of counter-positions” (Allen, 1999: 64). Thus, there are many different automatic assumptions and claims when the word news is evoked.

However, the format in which the news is told has been changing. In response to changes in the information environment, news is being presented in a more trivial and entertaining manner. Infotainment, the name given to this process, creates a much more descriptive rather than analytical approach to news reporting (Thussu, 2009). Armed conflict is one of those subjects in particular, which can be subjected to the infotainment format. “Covering wars is inevitably a difficult journalistic endeavour but the demand for live 24/7 news, as well as competition among news providers, can lead to the sensationalisation and trivialisation of often complex situations and a temptation to highlight the entertainment value of news” (Thussu, 2009: 113). Little is done by mass media in trying to adequately explain actual or proposed foreign policy, especially when the element of military conflict is present, instead there is a tendency to entertaining or promoting a certain path (Andersen, 2006: 82).

The infotainment format of news lends itself well to supporting a policy position in an armed conflict. On the superficial level, news concerns being objective and telling the truth, which can have a legitimising effect in terms news projecting itself as an objective and enlightening activity. On the applied level, infotainment brings a level of shallowness to the news through it being very descriptive (and therefore lacking in analysis), which has the tendency to leave the event out of context. Under these circumstances, it is known that a war is in fact about to start or has already started. However, the underlying reasons for the conflict are not revealed. Infotainment also has a tendency to assign values to the different parties of a story, which includes identifying the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ sides of a conflict.

Related to the issue of infotainment, however, not the same issue, is the problem of spin entering the news sphere. Spin is a means and form of rhetorical-based deception. “Spinners mislead by means that range from subtle omissions to outright lies. Spin paints a false picture of reality by bending facts, mischaracterising the words of others, ignoring or denying crucial evidence, or just ‘spinning a yarn’ – by making things up” (Jackson & Hall Jamieson, 2007: vii). Mixed in with this problem is the problematic of the question, what has happened to the truth? As noted by academics, such as McQuail, truth, objectivity and verification are all essential elements of the news. The contrary has been noted, “perhaps, they speculate, in the new information age reality is simply a matter of belief, not anything objective or verified” (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2010: 6). Ultimately, such as situation as the current one described above, when applied to the news industry leaves the public at risk from interest groups seeking to manipulate and exploit public perception and opinion.

### **Manipulating the News: How and Why**

If one is able to control the ideas that the public are exposed and hence integrate in to their mind-sets this is a tremendous exercise of power over the public. During the experience of the United States’ Committee for Public

Information, which was a propaganda institution that was used to create domestic public opinion support for entry into World War One and cultivate favourable views of the US among foreign audiences, laid the foundations for the way news is manipulated in the contemporary era. One of the means was to establish international news agencies or services that supplied the mainstream mass media with material that was likely to attain the stated objectives (Creel, 1920: 70-83). This is a matter of getting a message into the mainstream information flow in order to gain some kind of effect.

Primarily, however, the engineer of consent must create news. News is not an inanimate thing. It is the overt act that makes news, and news in turn shapes the attitudes and actions of people. A good criterion as to whether something is or is not news is whether the event juts out of the pattern of routine. The developing of events and circumstances that are not routine is one of the basic functions of the engineer of consent. [...] Newsworthy events, involving people, usually do not happen by accident. They are planned deliberately to accomplish a purpose, to influence our ideas and actions (Bernays, 1947: 119).

As noted by Bernays, news is not something that is somehow random, it appears with a sense and a purpose. News helps to frame and shape public perception and opinion, to inform what issues are important and in what particular manner to think about them. Bernays noted once that “it is not surprising that the man who is outside the current of prevailing public opinion should regard the press as a coercive force” (Bernays, 1923: 94). With regards to answering the aspect of the underlying motivations for manipulating the news, it is related to public opinion and the need to appear to be working with public consent.

For they [opinions] are derived, not necessarily by reason, to be sure, but somehow, from the stream of news that reaches the public, and the protection of that stream is the critical interest of the modern state. In going behind opinion to the information which it exploits, and in making the validity of the news our ideal,

we shall be fighting the battle where it is really being fought (Lippmann, 1920: 70).

Here, Lippmann illustrates the importance and significance of news in shaping public opinion. However, Bernays takes the process one step more, by highlighting the need to instrumentalise news as a means of shaping that same public opinion in order to bring about the appearance of public consent.

This phrase [the engineering approach] quite simply means the use of an engineering approach – that is, action based only on thorough knowledge of the situation and on the application of scientific principles and tried practices to the task of getting people to support ideas and programmes. Any person or organisation depends ultimately on public approval, and is therefore faced with the problem of engineering the public's consent to a programme or goal (Bernays, 1947: 114).

The above mentioned quote builds upon the notion that the news production process is not something that is done by 'accident', but rather by a very deliberate well-planned and executed approach. As such, this answers the how part of the question. The why aspect of the question, is that this is carried out in order to try and direct and then harness public opinion and sentiment through manipulating their perception of selected events and people. This is done within democratic settings as this is a necessary façade to project and that government plans and policies need to be seen to follow public opinion, even if that opinion and therefore consent, has been engineered.

### **The Role of Motivation and Propaganda in News**

For the purposes of this paper, the term propaganda, shall be made according to the late Philip Taylor's definition and understanding.

The deliberate attempt to persuade people to think and behave in a desired way. Although I recognise that much of propaganda is accidental or unconscious, here I am discussing the conscious, methodical and planned decisions to employ techniques of persuasion designed to achieve the specific goals that are intended to benefit those organising the process (Taylor, 2003: 6).

It is important to emphasize that this is a deliberate and planned exercise that is intended to elicit a response from the targeted audience in a manner that benefits the messenger. Within the context of this article, propaganda is a form of passive mass communication from a messenger that seeks to gain some measure of gain by influencing a target audience. The target audience may have little ability to directly feedback in a symmetrical manner as these mass communication means are managed informational assets. To be successful in persuading and influencing audiences, a variety of factors need to be taken in to account, including adaptability.

Successful propaganda depends on the adroit use of means under favourable conditions. A means is anything that a propagandist can manipulate; a condition is anything to which he must adapt. A propagandist can alter the organisation of his activities, modify the streams of suggestion which he releases, and substitute one device of communication for another, but he must adjust himself to traditional prejudices, to certain objective facts of international life, and to the general tension level of the community (Lasswell, 1927: 185).

A lot of what is needed to manipulate the information environment already exists. However, there is an acute need for awareness concerning which tactics and mechanisms work and those that do not have an effect. In the event of an emerging informational threat, these are often managed in a specific time tested manner. There have been numerous examples, when confronted with inconvenient information, there is an attempt to use the strategy to nullify rather than conceal the unwanted ideas or information (Lasswell, 1927: 202). Thus adaptability and knowing which mechanisms to employ are key considerations.

Bernays stressed that in order to be successful the communicated “themes must appeal to the motives of the public. Motives are the activation of both conscious and sub-conscious pressures created by the force of desires” (Bernays, 1947: 118). However, a significant problem that was identified by Walter Lippmann in the *Phantom Public*, is that a mobilised and primed audience do not

stay that way for very long (Lippmann, 1927: 103). Therefore, once an audience has been successfully mobilised it is necessary to act swiftly and before the same audience demobilises.

In a very frank book on the role and nature of communication in democracy, Bernays stated that one of the cherished presumptions is that every individual citizen makes up their mind of questions of public concern. However, he states that this is in fact a façade and instead the public is steered towards certain opinions and attitudes by a mixture of leadership and communication (propaganda). “From our leaders and the media they use to reach the public, we accept the evidence and the demarcation of issues bearing upon public question [...]” (Bernays, 1928: 38). Therefore propaganda acts as a mechanism between government and the people in a democratic society, seeking to make management easier by ‘guiding’ citizens into making certain decisions and choices (Ellul, 1965: 121-132). The act of communication with the intention to bring about change in a target audience requires a certain sequence be followed in order to achieve an effect on that audience.

“In supreme crises the dilemma is presented absolutely. Possibly a war can be fought for democracy; it cannot be fought democratically [...] In the presence of danger, where swift and concerted action is required, the methods of democracy cannot be employed” (Lippmann, 1927: 180). On the subject of creating and shaping the environment of public opinion in such a manner as to benefit the agenda of a political actor involves the process of making a common will. To bring about a common will involves the transfer of interest. On the subject of the non-contentious issue there is a great deal of detail and everything is clear and overwhelming. However, on the contentious issue or aspect it is very unclear and murky how this is to be achieved (Lippmann, 1922: 125-140). The state level actor is far from the only user of propaganda, especially in the current age of mobile communication technologies, where almost anyone can engage in communication with user generated content (Welch, 2013: 198). This does have the effect of



multiplying the deluge of unverified opinion and misinformation that is posing as news and analysis.

There needs to be some kind of motivating factor for the public in order to direct them in to consenting to the desired course of action. Syria is not Iraq from 2003, where the idea and motivating factor that was used to gain public consent to what would otherwise be inconceivable was the use of fear (Snow, 2003: 73-83). When a sense of fear is instilled in a target audience, their ability to think logically and rationally is severely hampered. But after the deceit of the 2003 Iraq War has been uncovered the public are less inclined to fall for the same trick. So in this context the motivating idea revolves around the concept universal values (democracy, human rights, rule of law ... etc.) and the feeling of revulsion (at the alleged levels of barbarity of the al Assad regime – therefore cannot negotiate with someone so inhumane).

Now to move forward to taking a case in point, the Western policy and goal of regime change in Syria. The non-contentious issue is clearly defined by the West and those supporting the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad, he must be removed from power. Justifications for this revolve around various alleged atrocities committed by the Syrian armed forces in the current war. When it comes to defining the contentious issue, it is much less clear. How should he be removed? There has been support of various armed factions and degrees of interference in Syria, up to the point of the abortive attempt to begin an open military action in the summer of 2013.

### **News on Syria: Post-August 2013**

This section draws upon mass media articles and material that has been reported on by the mass media. Owing to the sheer breadth and width of the material that is available, the subjects/events of specific interest shall be narrowed down to three. The first deals with the issue and the consequences of the war that was on the verge of being openly waged, but was averted at the last minute. This had the effect of temporarily narrowing the available choices, including the then

preferred military option, which has meant that new means for achieving the goal of regime change need to be manufactured. The second set of issues and topics relates to enhancing the negative attributes assigned to the Assad regime and therefore emphasize the need for change. For instance, the early predictions that the chemical weapons deal would fail, when this did not pass, then the lack of probability that the Assad regime would live up to its promises. A last point to analyse is the 'revelation' of the so-called industrial killing taking place in Syria by the Assad regime. The framing used in some political circles simply defies any reasonable response owing to the imposed level of oversimplification. Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott characterised the Syrian Civil War as being 'goodies' versus 'baddies'.<sup>8</sup>

Mass media and journalism are part of the problem, insofar as generating balanced and logical debate on the Syria issue. An opinion article in the Washington Times highlights a number of the problems. The opinion charged that "the media failed to provide a coherent understanding of what the United States should do and why. Columnists and commentators have used some of the most twisted logic to justify or oppose an active American role in Syria, including a diplomatic one. The media have become almost useless in helping their readers peer through the fog of discussion."<sup>9</sup> Journalists have failed in their professional obligations to presenting fair and objective reporting that is in the public interest.

The issue of media serving political interest by their coverage of the Syrian conflict is apparent. One instance was the use of media by Obama to influence public opinion for war by using the images of people that were victims of a chemical weapons attack. "I'd ask every member of Congress and those of you watching at home to view those videos of the attack and then ask, what kind of world would we live in if the United States of America sees a dictator brazenly

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<sup>8</sup>Tony Abbott Reduces Syria Civil War to 'Goodies' Against 'Baddies', The Huffington Post: United Kingdom, [http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2014/01/22/tony-abbott-goodies-baddies\\_n\\_4642072.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2014/01/22/tony-abbott-goodies-baddies_n_4642072.html), 22 January 2014 (accessed 23 January 2014)

<sup>9</sup>Harper, C., *Harper: In Syria War Debate, Media are Missing in Action*, The Washington Times, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/sep/11/harper-in-syria-war-debate-media-are-missing-in-ac/>, 11 September 2013 (accessed 12 September 2013)

violate international law with poison gas and we choose to look the other way?”<sup>10</sup> Obama is trying to use the infotainment value of the photos rather than any power of logical and concise argument to persuade the public to go to war.

Another story demonstrates the ease with which manipulations and propaganda passes through media, without being challenged or any signs of contrition from the media outlet concerned. Elizabeth O’Bagy did work at the think tank, Institute for War and Peace, specialising in Syria. Her work and advice was read and listened to by those in the Obama administration. In an op-ed to the Wall Street Journal, she did not declare her interest insofar as the think tank was a client of Syrian rebels. The op-ed she did concerned the level of infiltration by extremists into the Syrian opposition forces, a clear breach of ethics. A small note was added by the Wall Street Journal to the effect. O’Bagy was ultimately fired from the think tank, the reason given was that she claimed to have a doctorate from Georgetown University, which she did not.<sup>11</sup> There was no attempt at either verification or publishing objective information.

These same professional ‘mistakes’ made by journalists occur repeatedly with some acknowledgement from media, but rarely with any form of contrition or apology. For example, the BBC made some confessions concerning the poor level of their coverage of events within the context of the Arab Spring. Helen Boaden, the Head of News at the BBC confirmed that journalists “got carried away with events and produced over-excited reports” Adding further that reporters embedded with Libyan rebels failed to explore both sides of the story properly. BBC’s Middle East editor, Jeremy Bowen was criticised for sometimes allowing excitement to “infect the reporting, which some viewers described as too emotive and veering into opinion.” In addition, some two thirds of mobile footage

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<sup>10</sup> Wolfgang, B., *Obama Administration Use Grotesque Images to Sell Syria Strike*, The Washington Times, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/sep/10/obama-administration-uses-grotesque-images-sell-sy/>, 10 September 2013 (accessed 11 September 2013)

<sup>11</sup> Taylor, G. & Dinan, S., *Woman Who Wrote Op-ed Cited in Syria Hearing Fired for Lying About Credentials*, The Washington Times, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/sep/11/woman-wrote-wsj-oped-syria-fired-lying-credentials/>, 11 September 2013 (accessed 12 September 2013)

and other user generated content was broadcast without any caveats.<sup>12</sup> Ultimately, the question needs to be asked, bearing in mind that these same ‘errors’ are made during the course of successive conflicts, are these really mistakes or part of a deliberate strategy to shape public opinion with the news?

### *A War That Almost Was*

The basic intended script for Syria conflict is that it is a ‘spontaneous’ and popular local rebellion by moderates seeking to establish a democratic and free state. A notion of regime change is inherent in the process. There are many parallels here with other Arab Spring events, both in terms of the script and the reality of events. However, foreign jihadists are increasing greatly in numbers in Syria, at a rate that exceeds the flow of rebels into Afghanistan in the 1980s, with a minimum of 5000-10000 already present there.<sup>13</sup> The aims of some group are also far from the vision of democracy and freedom. In September 2013, an alliance of 11 of the rebel groups publicly declared that they seek to create a “clear Islamic framework.”<sup>14</sup> In an interview on the CBS 60 Minutes programme, the former deputy director of the CIA, made a clear and chilling statement. “I fear the break-up of the state of Syria, collapse of the central government, sectarian warfare, opportunity for al-Qaeda to have a safe haven in Syria that is not too dissimilar to the safe haven that it once enjoyed in Afghanistan.”<sup>15</sup> Given this recent background, the chemical weapons attack near Damascus in August 2013 provided what the US-led supporters for military intervention was the ‘perfect’ pretext to bring an end to the war in Syria and topple Assad.

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<sup>12</sup> Revoir, P., *Our Coverage of the Arab Spring was Over-Excited, Admits BBC*, Mail Online, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2164536/BBCs-coverage-Arab-Spring-sporadic-ignoring-uprisings-failed-favour-big-stories-Libya-Egypt.html>, 25 June 2012 (accessed 18 September 2013)

<sup>13</sup> Wong, K., *Foreign Jihadists Surpass Afghan-Soviet War, Storm Syria in Record Numbers*, The Washington Times, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/oct/20/foreign-jihadists-surpass-afghan-soviet-war-storm-/?page=all>, 20 October 2013 (accessed 21 October 2013)

<sup>14</sup> Sen, A. K., *Alliance of Rebel Groups Calls for an Islamist Syria, not a US-Backed Democracy*, The Washington Times, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/sep/25/alliance-of-rebel-groups-calls-for-an-islamist-syr/?page=all>, 25 September 2013 (accessed 26 September 2013)

<sup>15</sup> *Assad Overthrow in Syria Risky for US – Ex-CIA Official*, RIA Novosti, <http://en.ria.ru/news/20130916/183504535.html>, 16 September 2013 (accessed 17 September 2013)

On 21 August 2013 there was a chemical weapons attack launched near Damascus. Obama and Kerry labelled this as “definitive” evidence of Assad’s guilt, in spite of launching substantial evidence identifying precisely who responsible for the attack. This fitted very conveniently with Obama’s red line narrative on the use of chemical weapons, and a chance to get directly involved in the armed conflict. The UN produced a report on the attack<sup>16</sup> that was selectively used and interpreted by the US, France and Britain. For example, pointing to the type of rocket system allegedly used as ‘proof’ of the Syrian government’s guilt. The Syrian insurgent groups then used this as a means to try and give the US-led coalition the opportunity to get directly involved in the fighting. “The UN report offered damning and irrefutable evidence and clearly shows that only the Syrian regime could have carried out this attack.”<sup>17</sup> Different media accounts echoed the selectively picked and interpreted information from the UN report in order to try and build a solid case for war. The UN report, although it did prove that chemical weapons were used, never assigned blame to any one party.<sup>18</sup> Language used to try and convey the guilt of the Assad government was not absolutely certain, relying on innuendo and suggestion in order to get this message across.

This in turn fed into a narrative that discussed what level of military action should be taken in the West, led by the US, France and Britain. There was initially discussion of limited strikes as retaliation for the chemical weapons attack. Therefore, there was a shift from the tactic of “degrade” to “deter and degrade.” The original target list had included some 50 or so primary targets.<sup>19</sup> However,

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<sup>16</sup> The full name of the document was United Nations Mission to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic, *Report on the Alleged Use of Chemical Weapons in the Ghouta Area of Damascus on 21 August 2013*.

<sup>17</sup> Aji, A. & Karam, Z., *Syrian Rebels Demand Response After UN Report*, The Washington Times, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/sep/17/syrian-rebels-demand-response-after-un-report/?page=all>, 17 September 2013 (accessed 18 September 2013)

<sup>18</sup> 1) Gladstone, R. & Chivers, C. J., *Forensic Details in UN Report Point to Assad’s Use of Gas*, The New York Times, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/17/world/europe/syria-united-nations.html>, 16 September 2013 (accessed 17 September 2013); 2) Sanger, D. E. & Schmitt, E., *Allie’s Intelligence Differs on Details, But Still Points to Assad Forces*, The New York Times, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/04/world/middleeast/allies-intelligence-on-syria-all-points-to-assad-forces.html>, 3 September 2013 (accessed 4 September 2013)

<sup>19</sup> 1) Sanger, D., *Deter and Degrade: US Expands Target List*, Sydney Morning Herald, <http://www.smh.com.au/world/deter-and-degrade-us-expands-target-list-20130906-2tamg.html>, 7 September 2013

once a war begins it is always much easier to expand the originally stated parameters to something bigger and more ambitious. There were some signs of dissent began to appear quickly. The former Commander of the USS Cole, which was attacked terrorists while docked in Aden, Yemen in 2001 was firmly against involvement.

I think the first option we need to look at ... is to not get involved in this conflict. While chemical weapons used is a moral outrage, that doesn't define that our national security is in fact threatened to the point that we should take military action and get involved. We haven't defined what the objectives are going to be in this conflict. [...] We clearly have not been presented with the proof as the American people that the Assad regime has in fact launched those weapons. We need to see what the proof is so that we are not having a repeat like Iraq. We have no standing under international law to conduct these strikes right now.”<sup>20</sup>

According to Seymour Hersh's article in the London Review of Books the Obama administration “cherry picked intelligence to justify a strike against Assad.”<sup>21</sup> The article cited that some aspects of the intelligence report were highlighted and others omitted in order to create a suitable scenario that could allow public opinion to accept another war. Among the vital information omitted was the fact that actors other than solely the Syrian government have access to chemical weapons, such as Al-Nursa.<sup>22</sup> The intelligence report started with the

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(accessed 7 September 2013); 2) *US Could Increase Scale of Syria Strikes: Official*, Space War, [http://www.spacewar.com/reports/US\\_could\\_increase\\_scale\\_of\\_syria\\_strikes\\_official\\_999.html](http://www.spacewar.com/reports/US_could_increase_scale_of_syria_strikes_official_999.html), 8 September 2013 (accessed 9 September 2013)

<sup>20</sup> Snyder, C., *Former USS Cole Commander on Syria: Don't Get Engaged in Conflict*, Fox News, <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2013/08/28/former-uss-cole-commander-on-syria-dont-get-engaged-in-conflict/>, 28 August 2013 (accessed 4 September 2013)

<sup>21</sup> Taylor, G., *Obama Lied About Syrian Chemical Attack, 'Cherry-picked' Intelligence: Report*, The Washington Times, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/dec/9/obama-lied-about-syrian-chemical-attack-cherry-pic/>, 9 December 2013 (accessed 17 December 2013)

The UN report assigned no blame for the chemical weapons attack, only confirming that one had taken place. There were attempts to pick out the damning information from this report.

<sup>22</sup> 1) *US 'Cherry-Picked' Syria Chemical Weapon Intel: Report*, Space War, [http://www.spacewar.com/reports/US\\_cherry-picked\\_syria\\_chemical\\_attack\\_intel\\_report\\_999.html](http://www.spacewar.com/reports/US_cherry-picked_syria_chemical_attack_intel_report_999.html), 9 December 2013 (accessed 17 December 2013); 2) Lee, A., *Seymour Hersh Alleges Obama Administration Lied on Syria Gas Attack*, The Wire, <http://www.thewire.com/national/2013/12/seymour-hersh-alleges-obama-administration-lied-syria-gas-attack/355899/>, 8 December 2013 (accessed 9 December 2013); 3) Calderone, M., *New Yorker, Washington Post Passed on Seymour Hersh Syria Report*, Huffington Post,

assumption of guilt and then tried to find and manufacture evidence to support this claim.<sup>23</sup> There were many inconsistencies in the intelligence report, a lot of which rested upon circumstantial evidence. For instance the claim that the traces of a gas attack disappear very quickly and that the UN inspection team had arrived too late, which was quickly proven false by experts in the field. Very precise deaths of the attack also raised suspicion – 1429 dead, including 426 children. Another point that attracted attention was the claim that US intelligence had picked up military signals traffic several days before the attack, concerning the intention to use chemical weapons.<sup>24</sup> If this was so, why were no efforts made to warn the civilians?

Reliance was made on the use of emotional and convolution in the report, which employs language tactics that some found comparable with the manufacturing of a war pretext in Iraq some 10 years earlier. The deceptive phrasing meant that different interpretations were possible, and meanings do not appear what they seem to be at first glance.<sup>25</sup> A dozen former military and intelligence officials took the time to tell Obama that the information that they have on this case contradicted the official version of the story. “There is a growing body of evidence from numerous sources in the Middle East – mostly affiliated with the Syrian opposition and its supporters – providing a strong circumstantial case that the August 21 chemical incident was a pre-planned provocation by the Syrian opposition and its Saudi and Turkish supporters.”<sup>26</sup> One final piece of the puzzle, which adds to the already significant inconsistencies is the fact that the Syrian government had invited UN inspectors to the area in order to check on

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[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/12/08/seymour-hersh-syria-report\\_n\\_4409674.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/12/08/seymour-hersh-syria-report_n_4409674.html), 8 December 2013 (accessed 9 December 2013)

<sup>23</sup> Kotsev, V., *Syria Sarin Report Blows Holes in US Claims*, Asia Times, [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle\\_East/MID-01-101213.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/MID-01-101213.html), 10 December 2013 (accessed 17 December 2013)

<sup>24</sup> 1) Allam, H. & Seibel, M., *To Some, US Case for Syrian Gas Attack, Strike Has Too Many Holes*, McClatchy, <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2013/09/02/201027/to-some-us-case-for-syrian-gas.html>, 2 September 2013 (accessed 7 September 2013);

<sup>25</sup> Porter, G., *How Intelligence Was Twisted to Support an Attack on Syria*, Truth-Out, <http://truth-out.org/news/item/18559-how-intelligence-was-twisted-to-support-an-attack-on-syria>, 3 September 2013 (accessed 4 September 2013)

<sup>26</sup> *Obama Warned On Syrian Intel*, Consortium News, <http://consortiumnews.com/2013/09/06/obama-warned-on-syrian-intel/>, 6 September 2013 (accessed 18 September 2013)



allegations and claims of previous chemical weapons attacks on 18 August (three days before the attack).<sup>27</sup> Why would they then launch a full scale chemical weapons attack knowing the inspection team was close and Obama's warnings of the red line on the use of chemical weapons?

When the scale of the public backlash to the idea of another military campaign in the Middle East and North African region to topple another dictator became known, it would have been very difficult to continue the course and go to war. There needs to be some kind of sense or façade of legitimacy to the venture, which Syria did not, especially after the results of Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya have come to fruition. The talk of war as the only option became rarer in face of such united opposition to the planned war. There were still some quips about an 'opportunity' lost. The British Chief of Defence Staff, Sir Nicholas Houghton, gave a talk at the Royal United Services Institute in London where he warned that the United Kingdom was in danger of losing its 'courageous instinct' in international affairs.<sup>28</sup> Britain's Foreign Commonwealth Office also complained that the success of the negotiated settlement concerning Syria's chemical weapons that averted increasing the complexity and intensity of the armed conflict through direct foreign military intervention did not ease the suffering of the Syrian people.<sup>29</sup> However, the proposed logic of intensifying a war to help ease the suffering of ordinary Syrians seems to be somewhat counter-intuitive.

In contrast to his position before the need to back down from waging war in the summer of 2013, President Obama also tries to present the option needed as being a political solution. Adding that, "I am not haunted by my decision not to

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<sup>27</sup> Parry, R., *Murky Clues From UN's Syria Report*, Consortium News, <http://consortiumnews.com/2013/09/17/murky-clues-from-uns-syria-report/>, 17 September 2013 (accessed 18 September 2013)

<sup>28</sup> Jones, S., *UK Losing 'Courageous Instinct', Warns General*, Financial Times, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/ea62d4fe-6827-11e3-8ada-00144feabdc0.html>, 18 December 2013 (accessed 19 December 2013)

<sup>29</sup> *Britain Says OPCW Syria Success Does Little to Help Beleaguered People*, UPI, [http://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/Special/2013/11/01/Britain-says-OPCW-Syria-success-does-little-to-help-beleaguered-people/UPI-48911383314505/](http://www.upi.com/Top_News/Special/2013/11/01/Britain-says-OPCW-Syria-success-does-little-to-help-beleaguered-people/UPI-48911383314505/), 1 November 2013 (accessed 4 November 2013)



engage in another Middle Eastern war.”<sup>30</sup> Secretary of State John Kerry echoed Obama’s call for focus on a political settlement. “There is no military solution in Syria. [...] There can be, there will be a political solution if everybody gets together and works for it.”<sup>31</sup> British Foreign Secretary William Hague chimed in on this new message too. “No one should underestimate the difficulty of the negotiations ahead [...] But we will not give up on diplomacy as the route to stopping the appalling bloodshed.”<sup>32</sup> NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen stated that “there is no military solution to the conflict in Syria” and that he did not anticipate “any further role” for the alliance in Syria. This contrasted to his statements after the 21 August 2013 chemical attack when he called for “a firm international response” (including military options).<sup>33</sup> With the original favoured option of military strikes being unpopular and discredited, as can be seen above, leading political actors in the West came to adopt the political over the military solution.

### *Further Ways of Demonising and Obstructing the Assad Government*

Peace talks are bound to fail owing to the entrenched positions and the high price to be paid by the losing side. However, there needs to be some kind of mimic or imitation of the routine in order to try and show the public that ‘everything possible’ is being done to secure peace publicly, whilst continuing to pursue not so public plans that are at odds with the public façade. The script requires, within the realm of infotainment, that the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ sides of a conflict be named and identified, to allow for public sympathy and support. In this regard, the negative

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<sup>30</sup>Errnst, D., *Obama Staunchly Defends Syria Policy, Blasts Critics’ ‘Magical Thinking’*, Washington Times, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/jan/21/obama-schism-between-sunni-and-shiite-muslims-prof/>, 21 January 2014 (accessed 23 January 2014)

<sup>31</sup>Kerry: *No Military Solution in Syria*, UPI, [http://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/Special/2013/10/14/Kerry-No-military-solution-in-Syria/UPI-79631381770893/](http://www.upi.com/Top_News/Special/2013/10/14/Kerry-No-military-solution-in-Syria/UPI-79631381770893/), 14 October 2013 (accessed 15 October 2013)

<sup>32</sup>*Syria War Requires Political Solution, London Says*, UPI, [http://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/Special/2014/01/13/Syria-war-requires-political-solution-London-says/UPI-62501389636348/](http://www.upi.com/Top_News/Special/2014/01/13/Syria-war-requires-political-solution-London-says/UPI-62501389636348/), 13 January 2014 (accessed 14 January 2014)

<sup>33</sup>*NATO Chief: ‘No Military Solution’ to Syria Conflict*, Space War, [http://www.spacewar.com/reports/NATO\\_chief\\_No\\_military\\_solution\\_to\\_Syria\\_conflict\\_999.html](http://www.spacewar.com/reports/NATO_chief_No_military_solution_to_Syria_conflict_999.html), 10 October 2013 (accessed 11 October 2013)

characteristics of Assad are emphasized and those of the ‘opposition’ are ignored or down played.

The threat of Syrian non-conventional weapons continues. There has been a large chorus from the US, UK and France that cast doubt and aspersions upon the Syrian government and their intentions and/or abilities to live up to its international commitments. With some five months remaining before the deadline of 30 June 2014 (the time by which the chemical weapon stocks need to be destroyed), the US Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel, criticised the Syrian government for ‘dragging its feet’ on chemical weapons. “I do not know what the Syrian government’s motives are – if this is incompetence – or why they are behind in delivering the materials.”<sup>34</sup> Such a statement seems to be apparently devoid of the realities on the ground, i.e. that Syria has been locked in a protracted civil war that makes movement difficult. Two storage sites of chemical weapons components that are readied for shipment came under rebel attack.<sup>35</sup> There was no sign of international indignation or condemnation of these military strikes against the chemical weapons sites expressed by the West. Not to mention an enemy that is making that movement more dangerous, and likely to be using weapons supplied to them by the same Americans complaining about a lack of progress.

New rumours concerning possible weapon threats have begun to circulate in January 2014 too. These are based upon rumour and supposition and not upon concrete proof. Probabilities are converted into certainties. The Director of National Intelligence, James Clapper, launched into guesswork on an alleged biological weapons programme in Syria. “We judge that some elements of Syria’s biological warfare programme might have advanced beyond the research and development stage and might be capable of limited agent production, based upon the duration of its longstanding programme. [...] To the best of our knowledge,

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<sup>34</sup>US Says Syria ‘Dragging its Feet’ on Chemical Weapons, Space War, [http://www.spacewar.com/reports/US\\_says\\_Syria\\_dragging\\_its\\_feet\\_on\\_chemical\\_weapons\\_999.html](http://www.spacewar.com/reports/US_says_Syria_dragging_its_feet_on_chemical_weapons_999.html), 30 January 2014 (accessed 3 February 2014)

<sup>35</sup> Cumming-Bruce, N. & Gladstone, R., *Syria Reports 2 Attacks on Chemical Arms Sites*, The New York Times, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/09/world/middleeast/syria-chemical-arms.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/09/world/middleeast/syria-chemical-arms.html?_r=0), 8 January 2014 (accessed 9 January 2014)

Syria has not successfully weaponized biological agents in an effective delivery system, but it possesses conventional weapon systems that could be modified for biological-agent delivery.”<sup>36</sup> However, this new ‘discovery’ did not attract much media attention at the time, and given the level of deception used on the UN report to try and provoke the circumstances that would allow another war, people had become rightly suspicious and wary.

Attempts are also used to try and manage perception of upcoming key events by the public, in order to try and consolidate the primary narratives. The Geneva II peace talks were more than likely to be doomed before they even started. However, the narrative performance stressed the cooperation from the opposition and the contrary from the Syrian government. A sticking point, and naturally enough, is to go to such talks with sets of pre-conditions and preconceptions. One of the starting points was the understanding that Assad should step aside and power would go to a transitional government. To reinforce the ‘legitimacy’ of this notion there were comments like those from US Secretary of State Kerry – “One man and those who have supported him can no longer hold an entire nation and a region hostage.” This is stemming from his alleged resorting to excessive brutality robbing him of his ‘legitimacy.’<sup>37</sup> Other events that occurred indicate that the talks would fail even before they began, however, the blame had already been assigned for this occasion.

One of the events that highlighted the variety of obstructions that can be used was the delay of the official Syrian government delegation enroute to the Geneva talks via Athens. The scheduled route via Athens was to enable refuelling of the aircraft, on a path that had been pre-arranged and agreed to. However, when the plane landed, the Greek refuelling refused to service the aircraft and cited a

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<sup>36</sup> *Syria May Be Able to Produce Biological Weapons: US, Space War*, [http://www.spacewar.com/reports/Syria\\_may\\_be\\_able\\_to\\_produce\\_biological\\_weapons\\_US\\_999.html](http://www.spacewar.com/reports/Syria_may_be_able_to_produce_biological_weapons_US_999.html), 29 January 2014 (accessed 3 February 2014)

<sup>37</sup> 1) Lee, M. & Karam, Z., *Syrian Peace Talks Stuck Over Assad's Future*, The Washington Times, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/jan/22/syrian-government-us-no-right-remove-assad/>, 22 January 2014 (accessed 23 January 2014). 2) Taylor, G., *Syria Talks Open With Clash on Assad's Fate*, The Washington Times, [http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/jan/22/contentious-opening-summit-syria/?utm\\_source=RSS\\_Feed&utm\\_medium=RSS](http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/jan/22/contentious-opening-summit-syria/?utm_source=RSS_Feed&utm_medium=RSS), 22 January 2014 (accessed 24 January 2014). 3) Shotter, J., Daragahi, B. & Dyer, G., *Disagreement Over Future Role of Assad*, The Financial Times, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/0545f838-8335-11e3-aa65-00144feab7de.html>, 22 January 2014 (23 January 2014)

trade embargo imposed by the European Union. There was a resulting delay of about four hours, which threatened a special meeting the delegation had with the UN Secretary-General.<sup>38</sup> Another point that demonstrated the selective manner of the peace talks was the nature of those who were invited.

It is in the interests of genuine peace talks to include all parties engaged in the conflict to come to the table. If this does not happen, then not all of the parties are bound by any agreements that could result from the talks, thereby threatening any possible progress. Just a few days before the Geneva II talks, the UN Secretary-General caused a sensation with the announcement that he had invited Iran to the talks.<sup>39</sup> As a result, the Syrian opposition, France and the United States mounted a campaign to have the invitation withdrawn. The reason given was based upon the demand that a series of preconditions must be accepted, which includes the acceptance of a need for a transitional government.<sup>40</sup> The predictable result being Iran's invitation was withdrawn just 24 hours after being issued.<sup>41</sup> Ultimately the peace talks predictably failed. Equally predictably, the blame was levelled solely at the Assad government. "The regime is responsible for the lack of real progress in the first round of negotiations." There was also a volley of symbolic rhetoric directed against the Syrian government by the London 11 nations (US, UK, France, Germany, Italy, Turkey, Jordan, Qatar, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the

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<sup>38</sup> 1) *Syria TV Says Peace Talks Delegation Delayed in Greece*, Reuters News, <http://in.reuters.com/article/2014/01/21/syria-crisis-plane-idINDEEAOK0B720140121>, 21 January 2014 (accessed 22 January 2014); 2) *Syrian Delegation Plane Arrives at Geneva Airport After Four Hour Delay at Athens Airport*, Sana Syrian Arab News Agency, <http://sana.sy/eng/21/2014/01/21/523559.htm>, 21 January 2014 (accessed 22 January 2014); 3) *Greek Firm Refuses to Refuel Syrian Peace Envoys' Plane*, Euronews, <http://www.euronews.com/2014/01/21/plane-carrying-syrian-delegation-prevented-from-refuelling-in-athens>, 21 January 2014 (accessed 22 January 2014)

<sup>39</sup> Sengupta, S. & Gordon, M. R., *UN Invites Iran to Syria Talks, Raising Objections From the US*, The New York Times, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/20/world/middleeast/un-invites-iran-to-peace-conference-on-syria-surprising-us-officials.html>, 19 January 2014 (accessed 21 January 2014)

<sup>40</sup> Dyer, G. & Daragahi, B., *Opposition Threatens to Pull Out of Syria Talks*, The Financial Times, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/aa7c4632-80fa-11e3-b3d5-00144feab7de.html>, 20 January 2014 (accessed 21 January 2014)

<sup>41</sup> Dyer, G. & Daragahi, B., *UN Rescinds Iran's Invite to Syria Talks*, The Financial Times, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/a0e9d05c-81b9-11e3-87d5-00144feab7de.html>, 20 January 2014 (accessed 21 January 2014)

United Arab Emirates) for allegedly targeting civilians.<sup>42</sup> This only tells half of the story though, and does not answer the basic question, why should one side make all of the concessions that will ultimately lead to its demise without any inducements? Nothing was offered in return for making any sort of concessions, it is understandable that Syria would be reluctant to make them, especially when being lectured on ethics and code of conduct by parties responsible for arming and supplying their enemies.

### *Killing on an 'Industrial' Scale*

One of the recurring themes that is played at most occasions when international military interventions are proposed is to have some kind of atrocity or war crime, often evidence happens to be 'discovered' at some critical and symbolic juncture in time. These stories are meant to cause a great sense of revulsion and to generate the demand for some kind of action to be taken. These alleged atrocities and war crimes often have strong connotations with the actions of Nazi Germany, just to emphasize how urgent and ethically and/or morally justifiable the following proposals are (often involving the use of military force).

A news story broke from 20-22 January 2014, concerning a story that alleged 'industrial' killing was being carried out by the forces loyal to Bashar al Assad. This story just so happened to break out on to the front pages of the international press immediately before the Geneva II peace talks that were scheduled to begin on 22 January 2014. Officials in the United States admitted that they had known about the photos of torture victims since November 2013, but had been trying to verify them. It is claimed that there are about 55000 pictures that indicate the deaths of some 11000 people.<sup>43</sup> The story was quickly circulated from

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<sup>42</sup> Cumming-Bruce, N. & Gordon, M. R., *Syrian Talks Ending First Round, Fail Even to Agree on Easing Aid Blockade*, The New York Times, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/01/world/middleeast/syria-talks.html>, 31 January 2014 (accessed 3 February 2014)

<sup>43</sup> Landler, M. & Hubbard, B., *State Department Learned in November of Photos Said to Show Torture Victims in Syria*, The New York Times, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/23/world/middleeast/photo-archive-linked-to-torture-seems-unlikely-to-alter-us-policy-on-syria.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/23/world/middleeast/photo-archive-linked-to-torture-seems-unlikely-to-alter-us-policy-on-syria.html?_r=0), 22 January 2014 (accessed 23 January 2014)

the Guardian and CNN, without any form of critical approach, together leading Western and international media.

The photos were supplied by a defector, allegedly employed by the Syrian Military Police, to photographically document each of the bodies. These photos were showing scarred and emaciated corpses, which had been allegedly victims of the Syrian government. Given the codename Caesar, the defector was hailed as finally providing clear “direct evidence” of atrocities committed by Syrian government forces.<sup>44</sup> There was the predictable rhetorical reaction to the photos, mentioning the industrial scale killing of the Nazi death camps.<sup>45</sup> This particular manufactured crisis may be an attempt to try and bring back the open military option in Syria. “Mr Assad’s enemies say they hope the leak [...] will cause enough revulsion in the West to prevent any deal that might leave him in place, or perhaps prod the West into more muscular steps to remove him, just as the Serbian massacre at Srebrenica in 1995 moved NATO to launch airstrikes in the Balkans.”<sup>46</sup>

Analysing the language used, especially when it came to the issue of ascertaining and projecting levels of certainty and credibility of the photos. On the surface there is an element of certainty concerning the validity and the significance of the photos, which is that Assad is guilty and this is proof of the level and scale of the killing. However, when subjected to a more detailed analysis the articles contained an embedded level of uncertainty. “So far, only a few photographs have actually been released by lawyers commissioned by the Qatari government, an avowed opponent of Mr Assad, and the claims about their origins could not be

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<sup>44</sup> Mackey, R., *War Crimes Experts Call Syrian Defector’s Photographs ‘Direct Evidence’ of Assad’s ‘Killing Machine’*, The New York Times, [http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/01/20/war-crimes-experts-call-syrian-defectors-photographs-direct-evidence-of-assads-killing-machine/?\\_php=true&\\_type=blogs&\\_r=0](http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/01/20/war-crimes-experts-call-syrian-defectors-photographs-direct-evidence-of-assads-killing-machine/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0), 20 January 2014 (accessed 22 January 2014)

<sup>45</sup> Miles, T. & Baczyńska, G., *‘Industrial Killing’ in Syria Likened to Nazi Death Camps*, Stuff.co.nz, <http://www.stuff.co.nz/world/middle-east/9635953/Syria-industrial-killing-likened-to-Nazi-camps>, 22 January 2014 (accessed 22 January 2014)

<sup>46</sup> Hubbard, B., & Kirkpatrick, D. P., *Photo Archive Is Said to Show Widespread Torture in Syria*, The New York Times, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/22/world/middleeast/photo-archive-is-said-to-show-widespread-torture-in-syria.html>, 21 January 2014 (accessed 22 January 2014)



independently verified.”<sup>47</sup>“These photos – if authentic – suggest that we may have only scratched the surface of the horrific extent of torture in Syria’s notorious dungeons.”<sup>48</sup> However, these details tended to be very limited, and were often buried under a much larger weighing of certainty and Assad’s guilt. The Independent characterised the findings as being a *smoking gun* and evidence of *systematic killing*.<sup>49</sup> An article in the World Post quoted almost solely evidence that supported the validity of the claims of torture by Assad’s security forces, using words like *clear evidence*, *industrial scale killing* and *compelling*.<sup>50</sup> Spiegel ran the headline *Syria’s Bodies: ‘the stench was unfathomable*.’<sup>51</sup> The news reports were clearly biased and aimed at establishing the guilt of Assad, rather than seeking to engage in an objective investigation into the merits and validity of the information. One significant question that is not broached, let alone answered is why would a regime engaging in crimes of such a nature want a full and complete documentation of these, which could be used later to condemn them?

Although the source material was derived from an alleged defector given the code name Caesar in terms of the photographs, media outlets focused upon the report conducted by the British law firm Carter-Ruck and Co was provided as being the basis of legitimacy and proof of what the photographs seemed to show. The law firm’s ‘investigation’<sup>52</sup> was financed by Qatar, which has been actively working at overthrowing Assad and Libya’s Gaddafi before him. A

<sup>47</sup> Hubbard, B., & Kirkpatrick, D. P., *Photo Archive Is Said to Show Widespread Torture in Syria*, The New York Times, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/22/world/middleeast/photo-archive-is-said-to-show-widespread-torture-in-syria.html>, 21 January 2014 (accessed 22 January 2014)

<sup>48</sup> Black, I., *Syrian Regime Document Trove Shows Evidence of ‘Industrial Scale’ Killing of Detainees*, The Guardian, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/20/evidence-industrial-scale-killing-syria-war-crimes>, 21 January 2014 (accessed 22 January 2014)

<sup>49</sup> Dutta, K., *Torture in Syria: Photos may be Proof of ‘Industrial-scale Killing’ Carried out by Assad Regime*, The Independent, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-photos-may-prove-claims-of-torture-by-assad-regime-9073339.html>, 21 January 2014 (accessed 22 January 2014)

<sup>50</sup> Faulconbridge, G., *Syria ‘Industrial’ Killing: Report Details Deaths of 11000 in Assad’s Jails*, The World Post, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/01/21/syria-industrial-killing-assad-jails\\_n\\_4636199.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/01/21/syria-industrial-killing-assad-jails_n_4636199.html), 21 January 2014 (accessed 22 January 2014)

<sup>51</sup> Reuter, C. & Scheurermann, C., *Syria’s Bodies: ‘The Stench was Unfathomable’*, Spiegel Online, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/spiegel-reporting-supports-accounts-of-torture-and-execution-in-syria-a-945760.html>, 27 January 2014 (accessed 30 January 2014)

<sup>52</sup> *A Report into the Credibility of Certain Evidence With Regard to the Torture and Execution of Persons Incarcerated by the Current Syrian Regime*, London, Carter-Ruck and Co., January 2014

situation that media are aware that can affect the perceived legitimacy of the report, which is why they declare this interest. There is an attempt to whitewash the situation.

The investigation and report undertaken by the British law firm was financed by Qatar, which likely explains the fact that it was made public concurrently with last week's Syria conference in Geneva. Qatar backs the Syrian rebels, but the country's stance does little to take away from the power of the images provided.<sup>53</sup>

This is an emotionally based appeal, rather than a purely logical one, as the clear clashes of interest and lack of objectivity are clearly apparent. In fact the quote mentions the “power of the images” and not whether the report is objective and reliable, which has implications for the photos. Other media refer to the report as an ‘independent’ study, something which it is clearly not. Thus the issue of not so hidden vested interests in behind the report are ignored.<sup>54</sup> The case of Caesar also has very strong parallels with Iraq in the lead up to the 2003 war when defectors gave the US government ‘irrefutable’ proof that it wanted to hear about weapons of mass destruction, which were proven to be false in hindsight. This came with a continuing disastrous cost, but the desired regime change was achieved, Saddam Hussein was gone and an American-installed regime was in. Are things heading in the same direction again?

## **Conclusion**

The one consistent goal for the US-led coalition has been regime change – the overthrow of Assad in favour of a more US friendly regime. This has followed the ‘typical’ Arab Spring scenario of ‘peaceful’ demonstrations by those seeking democracy and freedoms being violently broken up by a cruel dictator. The event

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<sup>53</sup> Reuter, C. & Scheurermann, C, *Syria's Bodies: 'The Stench was Unfathomable'*, Spiegel Online, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/spiegel-reporting-supports-accounts-of-torture-and-execution-in-syria-a-945760.html>, 27 January 2014 (accessed 30 January 2014)

<sup>54</sup> Edwards, D., *'Not Even Close to Reality' – Filtering Sources on the Syrian War*, Media Lens, [http://medialens.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=754:not-even-close-to-reality-filtering-sources-on-the-syrian-war&catid=52:alerts-2014&Itemid=245](http://medialens.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=754:not-even-close-to-reality-filtering-sources-on-the-syrian-war&catid=52:alerts-2014&Itemid=245), 4 February 2014 (accessed 4 February 2014)



is characterised as a grassroots and locally owned and run revolution, by people seeking positive change, although the placards being carried by the protestors are often in English. The sides are painted as being good side – the revolutionaries, the bad side – the incumbent dictator and the political system. Symbolic support is offered to the rebels by the US-led ‘international community.’ If regime change does not occur quickly enough, the aspects of the military side of the operation are increased, for instance the NATO campaign against Gaddafi.

News is the primary means for many people that are physically remote from the events. The manner in which the news is produced and disseminated violates the basic canons of any professional standards of journalism and/or fourth estate function. There is a lack of objectivity and verification, for example, which has been acknowledged by journalists themselves on occasion. Facts are not separated from values or opinions, and given the move to an infotainment format, it seems unlikely that the primary aim of the news media is to objectively inform the public.

Rather, the intention seems to be related to the notions that underpin Bernay’s concept of engineers of consent. This is done by a very selective construction of news in an emotional and descriptive format that encourages its readers’, listeners’ or viewers’ to react in a specific manner to the news that has been identified as being important. Events and issues are covered in a very specific manner, where the conclusions reached should ideally support the policy that has been or is about to be proposed to resolve the matter. In this manner, the news is not random or unplanned but done with a sense of direction and purpose that shapes and frames public opinion.

News has certainly been used extensively in the Syrian conflict to try and prime public opinion in the direction of permitting ‘humanitarian intervention’ in the shape of another military war. This depends on the perception held by the public as to who are the ‘good’ guys, who are the ‘bad’ guys, the inherent values of the conflict and the level of risk for Western countries that do get directly involved

in the fighting. As noted by a number of media commentators, media have been conspicuous by their absence in this latest conflict too, failing the public in their moral duty and obligation as the fourth estate.

This paper has only covered a very small and narrow part of the Syrian war, but nonetheless, has revealed a number of informational mechanisms and tactics that are designed to develop public consent for existing policy. The policy in this case is regime change, the primary question is how to set about achieving this in a practical sense. The military option was given a set back early on in the Syrian conflict, when the UN Security Council resolution that was identical to the one used on Libya, was vetoed.

A chemical weapons attack on 21 August 2013 seemed to be the perfect occasion to resurrect the idea of open military aggression, after years of being behind the scenes arming, supplying, funding and training insurgent groups. But its timing seemed too perfect, coming three days after a UN inspection team had been allowed access to investigate chemical weapons attacks and after Obama's remarks on creating a 'red line' on the use of chemical weapons. Familiar tactics were used – story of mass atrocity against a civilian target, the use of false and misleading information on the event. There was very little in the way of hard evidence, many points were vaguely and emotionally argued, circumstantial and relying on innuendo and stereotypes to have any credibility. Ultimately the lies and lack of credibility by the US-led charge for another war damaged their message, together with the fact that the public is war weary after over one decade of continuous war.

Stereotypes and prejudices against Assad and the Syrian government continue. This is meant to reinforce the notions of the good and bad sides of the conflict, which in reality is extremely blurred and lacking clear distinction. Ultimately, it is much easier for a public to be mobilised for war if they cannot empathize, understand and are reviled by side labelled as being 'bad'. For instance, there have been regular criticisms being levelled at the Assad regime about their lack of cooperation and predictions that the plan to dismantle the chemical

weapons stockpile will fail. This is in spite of many targets already being met, although the successes tend to be downplayed and minimised to try and project the negative more intensely. Blame is solely laid at the hands of Assad and his government, the so-called rebels are not judged or treated in the same manner. The framing of good and bad seems to be an attempt to try and mask the discrepancies in the vastly different treatment of the parties.

A final example given was that of the 'industrial scale' killing story. One more, the timing of the event seems to be very 'convenient' in terms of breaking just days before the Geneva II peace talks were scheduled to be held. Once more, the story is based upon circumstantial evidence at best, carried by a person that says he is a defector and that he has never actually seen any of the killing or torturing taking place. There are a number of parallels here to the case in Iraq, when the US used the 'evidence' and testimony of a defector in order to 'legitimise' the launch of the desired military attack on the country. Media were also complicit in this event too, failing to mention in many cases that an 'independent' report into the photos veracity by a London law firm was actually commissioned by Qatar, a leading external actor that is working to overthrow Assad.

A problem for the US and its allies is that the rebel factions are not united and not strong enough to topple Assad by themselves. This creates a situation not dissimilar to Libya when NATO was required to use its airpower in order to achieve victory and finalise the regime change there. Syria is another matter, the military option is extremely difficult owing to its over use and abuse through such mechanisms as Responsibility to Protect and Humanitarian Interventions. A lot of the informational deceit from past experiences, such as Iraq and Libya, has made the public more wary. This does not mean that the West shall stop trying to create a pretext to enable direct military intervention in Syria, owing to the fact that the current military stalemate is unlikely to be overcome by the

rebels alone. The problem being, within the context of achieving regime change, what other effective avenues exist?

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## РАЗРАБОТКА МЕТОДИКИ СОЦИАЛЬНОГО АУДИТА КАДРОВОГО ПОТЕНЦИАЛА ОРГАНОВ ГОСУДАРСТВЕННОЙ ВЛАСТИ

*Исследование выполнено при финансовой поддержке РГНФ в рамках проекта проведения научных исследований «Социальный аудит профессиональной деятельности государственных служащих», проект № 14-13-66005*

Проблема развития профессиональной компетентности и роста профессионализма государственных служащих является лейтмотивом федеральной и региональных программ реформирования государственной службы, в том числе областной государственной программы «Реформирование и развитие государственной гражданской службы Свердловской области (2010 - 2013 годы)» (далее – Программа). В цели программы указывается на формирование «кадрового состава государственной гражданской службы из высококвалифицированных